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A MODERN ITALIAN VIEW OF HUMOR.*

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

(Second Paper.)

SIGNOR BELLEZZA talks, and we all talk, of English humor, American humor, German humor, Spanish humor, French humor, Italian humor, as if they were essentially unlike, when essentially they are alike. I will not try to say how, for that way danger lies: the danger of trying to say what humor essentially is. I notice Signor Bellezza himself shuns that as much as possible, and contents himself with giving instances without theories. We know a joke when we see it, as we know a poem when we see it; but what a joke is we can no more safely undertake to say than what a poem is. There the thing is: like it or leave it, but do not expect any one to explain to you the grounds of your liking or leaving it. That is what Signor Bellezza mainly seems to say, and he is quite in the right. If he sometimes tries to distinguish between the different kinds of humor, by nationalities, it is perhaps because he has been tempted beyond his strength. For my own part, in the kind of humor which I know best—the American, namely—I have found examples of it in regions so remote that I have been forced to choose between faith in the solidarity of humor everywhere, and fear that the aliens are now and then able, by means of some telepathic plagiarism, to pilfer us of our good things before we say them.

I was always amused by the saying of a Western farmer in a very wet season, that “It rained and rained, and after a while it got so it set up nights and rained.” But in Switzerland I heard of an old peasant who remarked of a very cold season, “The winter has come to spend the summer with us,” and then I felt

*Paolo Bellezza. “*Humour.*” *Strenna a Beneficio del Pio Istituto dei Rachitici.* Milano. 1900.

that all republican peoples were really one, or else that American humor and Swiss humor were of the same native picturesqueness.

I.

In that chapter on grisly humor, which is one of the best in the book, and is the longest, we Americans enter freely, and chiefly, as we should, in the person of Mark Twain, who is cited four times to Thackeray's once, though he is distanced by Dickens. It is interesting to note how universal this humor is, and it seems to be really the most humorous humor, in imparting that shock of contrasts, which seems to be the essence of humor, or its prime motive. Shakespeare, Fielding, Guerrazzi, Godfrey Keller, Bret Harte, Heine, Quevedo, Addison, Larra, Kipling, Steele, Flaubert, Alfieri, Byron, Daudet, Dostoyevsky, Balzac, Hoffmann and Charles Mathews are by no means all the others who figure in this famous chapter, in support of my theory that humor is human and not national. When it comes to grinning back at skeletons, mocking at murder and smiling at suicide it appears that Americans, Englishmen, Germans, Italians, Spaniards and Frenchmen are pretty much alike. The honors are not quite so easy in the matter of gallows-humor; the North carries these off, as has already been allowed. In regard to cannibalism, Signor Bellezza thinks it the forte of Mark Twain, as a humorous inspiration. "And here," he says, "I do not mean fugitive touches, but whole stories based, if I may so express myself, upon anthropophagy," and in sufficient proof he limits himself to a synopsis of that terrible tale of "Cannibalism in the Cars," which has made us all shudder. He seems not to know of that yet awfuller adventure with the box of rifles in the express car, which in the way of grisly humor may challenge all literature for its like. In bizarre humor he puts us well towards the head, instancing from Mark Twain a passage out of "Adam's Diary," registering Adam's speculations as to the real nature of his first born and his place in zoölogy, and "Lucretia Smith's Soldier," whom Lucretia nurses back to life and finds the wrong man when he is well enough to have the bandages taken from his face. From George Derby (John Phoenix) he gives that early humorist's plan for the reform of language on a mathematical basis, with a maximum grade of 100. "Example: 'How are you?' 'I am 70, but my

mother, poor thing, is only 15, and I am afraid that before night she will not be more than 10.' Or: 'Madam, I am only 7 rich, but I love you 100, and I hope by hard work to put myself in a 65 position.'

II.

I am tempted to throw together what Signor Bellezza has to say of most significance concerning all the aspects of the business in hand. He confesses: "If I had to make a treatise in due form, or rather a regular discourse, I should find myself baffled at the start, because all treatises commence, as is just, with a bold definition, and humor cannot be defined. . . . It is a specialty of the Northern peoples, somewhat like the beer that we meridional folk find somewhat harsh to the palate, and would not like for our daily drink. It is neither acuteness, nor grace, nor *verve*; it has generally a serious aspect when all around are laughing, as Addison says, . . . and according to the greatest living humorist, Mark Twain, 'the humorist when he tells a story seems not to have the remotest suspicion that there is anything funny in it.' . . . Precisely here is the essential difference that distinguishes the humorous from the comic, of which it is yet a form; it springs rather from a contrast, and the contrast is . . . that of sorrow and joy, a pathetic situation and a comic circumstance; as has been felicitously said, 'it is an oscillation between laughter and tears.' . . . The humorist forbears the jeremiad, the lamentation, even when his soul is running over with anguish. He would not shed rivers of tears over the fate of man here below, doomed to yearn for the true, and to know it only with sore labor and in little part; but he will content himself in agreeing with Larra, that 'all the truths in this world could be written on a cigarette paper.' The social injustices that provoke the invectives of the pessimist and the sociologist he will formulate in the fashion of that famous sentence of Guerrazzi, 'Force is the great mother Eve of all the rights.' . . . But here let us understand ourselves clearly. If humor consisted solely in recognizing and formulating the relations that connect joy and sorrow, their confusion and their perennial alternation one after the other in human destiny, I should be ready to say that the humorists were as numerous as the authors, in fact, as the men themselves. . . . The

humorist is he who does not keep on singing this truth in all the various tunes, but is intimately seized and pervaded by it, and informs his thoughts and his works from it."

This is very well as far as it goes, but here nothing can go to the bottom, for if it could, humor is so deeply founded in human nature that any definition which reached it would be in danger of coming out on the other side, and proving a luminous concept of pathos. Our author makes a better try in saying of the humorist, "He does not know how to remain long, or will not, in a situation affecting, dramatic or otherwise serious; but he interrupts it brusquely with some unexpected observation that scatters, or, so to speak, disorients the ideas and sensations of the reader, and gives them a new direction." Again he says, beginning a fresh chapter, as he is apt to do with a fresh attempt at analysis, "Humor is truly among the literary kinds that which can be contained in the smallest terms. Nothing is too little; it finds its occasion in everything, even that which is slightest, thinnest, most impalpable, and for this reason it is difficult to analyze it. It lurks, let me say, in a parenthesis, in a comparison; the more modest the form it takes, the more vividly it frees itself and the more piquant it proves."

III.

Signor Bellezza, who is no mean humorist himself, says, as I have noticed, that the ancients, as they used to be called, though they have been growing more and more contemporaneous with us ever since the revival of learning, had no humor, in the modern sense. He refuses to tell why, because it would not be easy, and then he whimsically goes on to give at least one reason. "It is this: the world of the ancients was limited in space, and so by consequence in ideas, in cognitions, in sentiments; proportionately few, therefore, were those contrasts (of concepts and facts) from which humor chiefly springs. And for pity's sake, let me not be accused of irreverence for the ancients in general and their authors in particular. Shall the ancients be offended if it is said of them they did not know the use of tobacco, and were not Alpinists? That here and there," he adds, "you find in the classic writings some little splash, some slight trace, of what we understand by humor is another affair, and no one thinks of disputing it. It is seen, for instance, in that passage of Lucian's

'*Dialogues of the Dead*,' which I here give a part of: 'O Menippus, Diogenes exhorts you, if you have not laughed enough at things on earth, to come up here, where you will laugh more yet. There your laughter had always a certain doubt, such a doubt as, 'Who knows what will be after death?' But here you will not cease to laugh with your whole heart as I do now. Above all, you will see the rich, the satraps, the tyrants, so transfigured that they are to be recognized only by their lamentations. . . . And tell the beautiful and the strong that with us there are no longer any blond locks, nor black or blue eyes, nor carnation complexions, nor powerful limbs; but tell them that we are all pumpkin heads, skulls bereft of beauty,' etc."

It seems to me that in this passage alone Signor Bellezza casts his whole theory of the ancients in doubt, and it is curious to note that the grudge against the prosperous and fortunate, which we suppose to have come in with Christianity, was a commonplace of the pagans. As for that other before-mentioned theory of Signor Bellezza's, namely, that the Latin peoples have less humor than the Gothic, what he says in support of it is so interesting that I cannot deny myself the pleasure of reporting it. "Roots less profound, fibres less diffuse, does the plant of humor strike in Latin soil, for the reason, to give only one, of the specific qualities of its people, qualities which are determined in part at least by 'the ambient,' or the external conditions: the mild climate, the sky more smiling and sunny than elsewhere, nature all joyous, inviting to expansive jocundity. Yet if there is lacking in these literatures a true and proper current, or a continuous tradition, of the humorous, they seem, as it were, constellated by a few great writers who in this region have left the profoundest effect. Of Spain it suffices to recall that it is the country of Cervantes, as well as of Quevedo and of Larra," a humorist whom I do not know of; but I should like again to add to Signor Bellezza's list of witnesses against himself those modern Spanish writers whom I love so much. It may be that the large mixture of the Goths with the elder Spaniards brought that rich strain of humor into the Iberian blood, but Signor Bellezza has no opinion on this point. In regard to French humor, he summons enough witnesses, from Rabelais down, to put his reader in doubt again, and when it comes to his own Italians, the misgiving mounts. Is he too modest, or is he only mocking our

thick Gothic pride in a quality which we sometimes fancy we have the monopoly of? If he had said America was the classic home of humor, we should be less inclined to dispute him, but perhaps he is right, after all, in giving the primacy to England. More than in any other literature, the humorous conception of the universe prevails in the English, and that is the supreme proof of humor. It is suggested in the passage which he quotes from Lucian, concerning that certain doubt of what shall be after death, which lurks in our laughter here, and mutes it on our trembling lips. It is this certain doubt which gives its prevailing cast to English literature more in the mother isle than in our continental condition of it; and it is literature which is the expression of a people's soul. To us belongs the humor that laughs and makes laugh; I believe Mark Twain himself somewhere claims that our humor is the only humor that is funny, and without pushing this claim we can allow that it is funnier than the English. It may even be as wise, and yet at the end of the ends it is not so satisfying; so that one agrees with Signor Bellezza's final judgment when he declares Mark Twain to be the greatest living humorist, but adds: "Yet more than in Mark Twain and in Swift, more than in Addison and in Byron, the prism of humor darts from its thousand facets its varicolored and vivid flashes in him whom the world of letters so long ignored and contemned. . . . 'Wonderful Shakespeare!' exclaims Manzoni, in one of the few apostrophes which enthusiasm ever forced from the incontentable artist, 'wonderful Shakespeare!' . . . And with the names of these two idols of mine let me be allowed to close my haply too long discourse. It will be easy for critics to find defaults and mistakes in it. . . . Be my excuse with them, and with my readers generally, the immensity and the novelty of my theme, and the modest design which led me in treating it to offer nothing more than an attempt or an essay."

IV.

Through his ultimate expression of one's own opinion, Signor Bellezza puts himself so entirely in the right that one has no longer the least wish to find him wrong in anything. For my part, I should no more think of questioning his award of the eternal and universal humorism to Shakespeare than of questioning his verdict with respect to Il Twain, whom it is difficult,

after once habituating one's self to these Italian terms, to speak of in any others. He is not only the greatest living humorist, but incomparably the greatest, and without a rival since Cervantes and Shakespeare, unless it be that eternal Jew, Heinrich Heine, who of all the humorists is the least like him. Heine's humor is at every moment autobiographical, and for far the greater part Mr. Clemens's humor is so; Shakespeare's alone is impersonal, but this may be on account of the dramatic form, and more apparent than real. Heine and Mark Twain are both archromantic, just as they are both autobiographical, though to what different ends! One is subjectively romantic and personal, the other objectively romantic and personal. Mark Twain expresses in this difference the very essence and inalienable intent of American humor, which is apparently the least conscious and really the least literary of all the forms and phases of humor, while Heine's is the most conscious and the most literary. Is this measurably true of the other German humorists? I am not sure, and I cannot pretend to have the documents for the verification of the point. Of Heine I can more or less honestly speak, but as for the other German humorists, life is short, and art in them at least seems very long. The most wonderful thing in Heine is how he transmutes literature into life, and distills into it the blood and tears of literary anguish. Am I saying that he is a poseur? Perhaps I am saying that, but while he lay there in his mattress-grave in Paris, he mocked and mocked, not less than in his books, or at least when he had an audience; and no doubt the second nature which comes to men from bathing their souls in literature had made itself his first nature. He expressed the supreme humoristic conception of the universe in the cry from that grave:

"O schöne Welt, du bist abscheulich!"

and one's heart aches in pity and one's nerves thrill in awe of the poseur. After all, pain is not a pose, nor death, and there he knew both. In all his books he was at least true to his genius, for, in some light or other, everything that he wrote was humorous.

V.

In the admirable introduction which Signor Gaetano Negri has supplied to our author's work there are some passages which reveal a like, if not an equal, sense of the subject. "The classic

age," he says, "of this singular manifestation of the human spirit began with Shakespeare, and its importance grew from century to century, until it became the prevalence in ours, above all in the literature of the northern peoples. Humor is a form which could be born only of a highly complex society, traversed by various and opposite currents of thought and feeling, and in which was lost that security of principles and ideals which renders simple and clear the vision of the world. There is in humor a *fond* of skepticism more or less hidden, and a tendency to insistent and painful analysis, which finds in a smile the ultimate expression of the human contradictions."

I know that I am questioning Signor Bellezza's friend rather than himself when I doubt whether our humor did not begin with Chaucer instead of Shakespeare, and it is not at this end of the long line that I should find our essayist of an uncertain hold. It is in his notices of modern English humor that I find his hand lax, and now and then not of a wide grasp. He prefaces each of his chapters with an English motto, taking the first from Mark Twain's reply to M. Bourget, "Well, Humor is the great thing," but by far the greatest number of his instances and allusions are from and to the humor of Dickens. Now, this humor was very well in its way, but it hardly can make us laugh any more, and it was always rather of the nature of the laughter of horses, the play of horses. It was fantastic and willful and forced, and expressed itself in characters which bore much the same resemblance to the human species as the effigies which keep the crows from the cornfields, and in crude communities express the popular indignation with persons of opposite political convictions. He had not a humorous conception of life, which is the great thing rather than humor itself, if Mark Twain, who has it, will allow me to dispute him. Dickens was a great histrionic talent, and produced powerful if simple effects in that sort. But he was not of the fine English humorists who began with Chaucer, or with Shakespeare, as you please, and came down with Swift, and Addison, and Steele, and Sterne, and Goldsmith, and perhaps Scott, and Thackeray, to a humorist who may almost stand with Shakespeare himself. I mean Thomas Hardy, who in his vision of humanity, in his entirely ironical and humorous conception of life is possibly the greatest of all the present English, and I am not forgetting the Scotchman, Mr. William Gilbert. I am remembering that the

master of the whimsical cannot be the equal of a humorist in whom the sense of the droll is never parted from the sense of the dreadful, any more than it is in Heine, in whom the pathetic prevails, or Mark Twain, in whom the comic prevails. Yet Mr. Gilbert is, next to Mr. Hardy, the chief of those English humorists, after Shakespeare, who make us shake in our proud conviction that the American humorists are supreme. To this pair I should like to add the demure little figure of Jane Austen, which, when you look at it qualitatively, is so gigantic. Certainly, if any one ever had the humorous vision of the world, she had, and if her smile was dry rather than tearful, it was of an exquisite and almost unmatched intelligence.

VI.

Signor Bellezza does not mention Jane Austen with the three women whom he invites to his Valhalla, of whom two, I own, are as unknown to me as she seems to him. The third is hardly unknown to any lover of humor, and in naming and citing George Eliot he recognizes a humorist of the highest type, who failed to blend her qualities to that effect which is the highest type of humor. The face which she turned upon life was one-half tragedy and one-half comedy, and not that composite visage, so inextricably blended that you cannot tell whether it is laughing or crying, and is probably always both laughing and crying. "The humorist," says our author, "so wooes, so desires pain that the most atrocious pang becomes for him a source of satisfaction and delight; he jokes about it; he makes it the argument of pleasantries and epigrams." George Eliot was never quite up to this level; she kept her ambrosia in one cup and her infusion of wormwood in another.

Was she too honest, too kind, too good to mix them? After all, the draught is one that many tender and loving souls turn from with horror, insomuch that it may be gravely doubted whether there is humor in heaven, where there can be no contrast of the ideal and the real, the potential and the actual, which constitutes our life in this world, and which makes us burst into pitying tears, but also into cruel laughter, when we see it.

This doubt once seriously troubled me, but since the rich man began giving so handsomely as he has done, especially in America, there can no longer be the old misgiving as to his final destiny, at

least in the case of rich Americans, and I do not see why the humorists, who have got so much fun out of him here, should be shut out of his company there. Still I doubt if there will be joking there; and this ought to be some comfort to our English brethren, who are said to find American jokes so hard to understand, at a time when American jokes have become so common.

I am by no means persuaded that all the American jokes are worth understanding, or that the English are quite to blame for not laughing at them; and yet I cannot deny there is a pathos in the hard case of those jokers of ours who bring back their jokes in the original packages, as it were, from England. About this time they will be arriving home by steamer-loads, each with a sorrowful tale of humorous things of theirs that have failed in London. If we are to believe them, they have all moved in the highest English society, but even in those homes of the aristocracy, where Mr. Depew tells us there is such enlightened appreciation of intellectual worth, American humor has fallen dead from their lips with what used to be called a sickening thud. In view of this fact I have sometimes suspected that the American humorists have demanded too much of their English hosts, the nobility and gentry, with whom alone they consort in England. These have naturally not been able to supply the American atmosphere, the background of American experience essential to the appreciation of American humor. At one time our national humor played almost wholly around the difficulties of putting up and taking down that popular family altar, the parlor stove; and how should an Englishman understand it? At other times, our humor came entirely from the frontier, from the ranch and the mining camp, and was rich in the amusing suggestions of holding up travellers, and getting the drop on one's antagonists in barroom controversies, and other situations illustrative of the drollery of gun-play. The very last American joke which I heard of as failing in the best English society was that about the householder who puts his pistol into the face of the burglar at his window, with the brief warning, "You get!" and the burglar answers, "You bet!" When a glad American guest had confidently purveyed this musty chestnut, his mirthful consciousness of our national humor was chilled by the question of his hostess, "And what was the wager?" But she ought really to have had him put out of the house; and I am not sure that the English would not do well

to exclude American humorists from the society of their better classes.

I understood from something I heard Du Maurier say, twenty years ago, that telling stories at dinner had gone out in England, or was going out. "But Jones still tells stories," a commensal opposed. "Yes," said Du Maurier, "but you always feel as if he were tumbling for his dinner." In this fact, perhaps, we may find the reason of the thing which has mystified so many American jokers in their English experience. Perhaps the English have understood their stories perfectly well, but have not thought them in good taste, and so have not laughed. Or very likely they have jokes enough of their own, and do not care to be loaded up with ours. Perhaps they think we have no humor. Dickens tells us that when he first visited America he suffered from our deadly lack of it.

Certainly the English have humorists enough, and of a quality which it is preposterous for us to question, as we sometimes do, principally, I think, when we are resenting the failure of some common or garden humorist of ours to make them laugh. If they are a nation so dull as this sort of humorist reports, when he gets safely back, they should be the very richest soil for humorists to flourish in. What inexhaustible subjects for humor they must be! Even our defeated jokers find them so, when they report their failures at home, amid roars of sympathetic American laughter. We hug ourselves when we hear how those single-minded islanders have missed the point of our continental jokes; but what if after all, they are not so single-minded? What if they are in a national conspiracy to ignore our humor, and so to discourage our humorists from frequenting their shores?

VII.

The humiliating truth is that we are still not only quantitatively but also qualitatively behind the English in humor, and not only in literary humor, but also in artistic humor. I have named one artistic English humorist—he was, to be sure, a French Belgian on his father's side—who abounded in that sweetness which seems wanting in our comic artists. But Du Maurier was not the only English artist who abounded in sweetness, and whose satire was almost a caress. There was Leech, there was Doyle, there was Keene, each in his way most lovable as

well as witty. Except Mr. Peter Newell, whose quaintness is full of gentle charm, the only American like them that I can think of is Mr. Oliver Herford, who is an Englishman; the rest of our good fellows have all a biting, rather than a caressing, wit. They are inferior to the Germans as well as the English in their want of sweetness, their want of humanity, one may even call it. You can hardly take up a copy of *Fliegende Blätter*, or *Jugend*, or even *Simplicissimus*, without coming on proof of the fact; a spirit of kindness pervades not only those little domestic comedies which humorous German art is so rich in, but it tinges the sharpest political satire on which the humorists may venture in conditions where the law of *lese-majesty* is over-soul. We are the most intensely domesticated people in the world, with the purest and most loving family life; but if you believe our graphic humorists, we are always aiming to make mercenary marriages, when we are not trying for divorces, and our children are of an odiousness for which universal putting to bed would be gross indulgence. These humorists of ours are not nasty as to their minds, in the French way, but they are nasty in their tempers, apparently, or else they render a perfunctory obedience to a supposed ideal in us, when they make things that are banal and brutal and cruel. There is not one of them who embodies in the graphic way anything of the colossal humor, the constant generosity, of Mark Twain. We might suppose they would sometimes let themselves go in the direction of satire on our civilization, which needs it so sadly, but they nibble conventionally round the edges of society, and give us Summer Girls when they are not atrociously mocking the misery that walks our land in the Weary Willies they delight to show in a perennial week's beard and battered hat; or else they draw us impossibly trueulent millionaires.

If any of our comic artists has ever really a mind to come to the help of humanity with his pencil he will do well to read Signor Bellezza's chapter on humor in art. It will give him a perspective if it does not supply him a perfect philosophy.

W. D. HOWELLS.